

Early Dropout of Children and Youth from Sports – International Perspective and Societal Backgrounds

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Sport and physical activities of children are essential in forming their health, personality, society and other factors which affect their future life either directly or indirectly. Their life attitudes are shaped by experience, and one of domains that can be affected in them for ever based on positive or negative experience is physical activity and relation thereto. Significance and awareness of this societal problem currently lead to activities which are to support sports and physical movement of children and youth. Efforts focused on the prevention of early dropout of children from sports are in the interest of kinanthropological research studies, national children's sports support programmes where the issue often becomes part of political and programme statements of governments, civic and non-profit organizations and sports associations. In spite of all these efforts, however, we still face a massive dropout of children from sports, which is not replaced with an adequate alternative physical activity. Consequences of the negative, and sometimes even toxic experience with physical activity at early age lasts until adulthood, which brings a range of personal, health and social problems. Possibilities for reducing the phenomenon consist in systematic work dealing with the support and improvement of coaching procedures which will be focused more on the needs of children and diverted from the traditional perception of coaching education focused primarily on the needs of coaches, on the building of positive relationship with parents as partners in the process of physical education of children, and on extending the range of physical activities for children also in the environment of non-competitive sports.

ORGANIZATIONAL ACTIVITIES OF COMBATING THE “DROPOUT”

The fight against the dropout of children from sports and for the solution of this adverse phenomenon has given rise to various organizations and approaches across the society-wide spectrum, whose activities have been established in the following spheres:

- 1/ science;
- 2/ government institutions;
- 3/ non-profit organizations;
- 4/ cooperation of government, non-profit organizations and scientific institutions with sports federations and clubs.

We would like to highlight the theme as a resonant social problem on some specific examples from the particular domains and to mention concrete steps for its mitigation.

1/ The domain of science is represented primarily by research conducted by universities. In a majority of research studies, authors attempt to identify and describe processes leading to the early dropout of children from sports. Jeff Crane and Vivienne Temple (2015) published an extensive overview including 43 studies about the reasons of dropped out adolescents and marginally children too. The studies mainly characterized the situation in Europe (53.6 %) and North America

(39.0 %). The research design of the included studies contained statements of informants from the ranks of young athletes, in five studies also parents and coaches.

The most frequently mentioned reasons for the early dropout of children from sports were: lack of joy, perception of insufficient physical competences, physical development (in this case connected with acceleration aspects when gymnasts were less successful due to growth and changes of their body). Other identified reasons were associated with the perception of negative feelings towards coaches or team as a whole, and other recorded constraints included time, financial cost of sports, or deficient equipment not allowing to achieve high performance. The last factor mentioned by respondents concerned injuries after which the athletes did not return to their sports.

A study which was focused on the phenomenon from the long-term perspective (Enoksen, 2011) showed that reasons for dropout from sports develop naturally in line with the historical, social and cultural development of the society. Thus, topical themes of early dropout from sports in the 1970s and 1980s included also military service and marriage, i.e. reasons hardly imaginable to contemporaries. Nevertheless, the main reasons still included factors of training and performance (early specialization, injuries), education and duties (school as a priority of young sportsmen), motivation aspects relating to the lack of education and social factors (Enoksen, 2011, p. 31–39).

A scale was gradually stratified characterizing reasons for the early dropout from physical activities or sports and identifying three main groups thereof (Crane & Temple, 2014; Witt & Dangi, 2018):

- 1) Intrapersonal constraints
- 2) Interpersonal constraints
- 3) Structural constraints.

The research design of these works was conceived traditionally in the form of questionnaire survey or semi-structured interviews of quantitative or qualitative character. The research sample consisted of coaches, sportsmen and parents but mainly only one of these groups was included in the research, which however brought some problems associated with the objectivity of assessing actual reasons for the dropout from sports. What a coach may seem and interpret as a lack of interest in the given sports discipline or laziness, an athlete can feel differently and his/her behaviour may be misinterpreted. These limitations of traditional research design were known to Lukáš Mařík (2020) who used a research design based on the principle of triangulation (parent – sporting child – coach) in his dissertation, thus being able to bring unbiased results from the perspective of young sportsmen as well as from the perspective of coaches and parents. It was really confirmed that the issue is very complicated and biased by the fact that each participant in the represented groups of respondents can see the situation through the prism of his/her role. As an example, we can mention the case of a handball playing girl who stated the main reason for leaving her sports club was that *“Some older schoolmates were making fun of me and laughed at me”*. In the process of triangulation, her mother diagnosed the situation correctly by claiming that the sport and the particular sports club *“...did not make her (daughter) happy and she was going there just for us”*. The coach then perceived manifestations of the young athlete as insufficient effort in the process of training: *“She did not do too well and she did not appear to have interest to do something with it either”*. (Mařík, 2020, p. 54).

There is a number of research studies describing the phenomenon, which help to identify the problem but do not offer its solution. Therefore, it is important that the approach to the solution considers the above-mentioned levels and is targeted at the verification of theoretical procedures such as efforts for their implementation directly in educational activities of individual sports associations or clubs. However, a mere antagonistic approach is not enough (have fun, improve

sports skills, keep fit, excitement from the competition, be a part of the team, competition as such and physical activity itself).

2/ Government institutions promote the sports of children and youth, too, in effort to mitigate the impact of early dropout from physical activities or sports. Support at the highest or regional level comes from the European Union, from governments of various countries as well as from regions. One of main contributions of the European Commission to the issue and society-wide mitigation of its impact is implementation of the document White Paper on Sport (2007). The primarily social role of sports is highlighted in many sport and health promoting programmes, such as “*health enhancing physical activity – HEPA*”, Public Health Programme 2007–2013, Programmes of Youth and Citizenship (collaboration of sports organizations, schools, civil society, parents and other partners at local levels) or Lifelong Learning Programme.

As an example of national programmes focused on the reduction of dropout, we can mention some activities of the Czech government such as the *Sport Concept for 2016–2025* focused on the continual education of coaches, enhancement of their skills and their application in practice. Its aim is to reduce negative factors such as: “*decline of spontaneous physical activities of children, longitudinal reduction of fitness in children and youth, increasing obesity, decreased level of movement literacy, low membership of organized sports as compared with the EU average, decline in expertise, non-existence of research in sports ...*” (*Sport Concept for 2016–2025*, <https://www.msmt.cz/sport-1/koncepce-podpory-sportu-2016-2025>).

In Poland, another member country of KidMove project, the dropout of children and youth from sports is an issue which is not being addressed at the legislative level. Thanks to the still high number of children who are physically active and involved in sports clubs, this phenomenon is not yet seen as a threat. Although there is quite a lot of talk about the growing reluctance of children and youth to take up sports (mainly due to electronic media), only a little is mentioned about how to prevent children and youth from giving up sports.

It should be pointed out, however, that large promotional efforts are still being made to promote an active lifestyle for children and youth. These activities are financed from both national and local government funds. A large and important activity was the plan to build playing fields in each municipality; it was implemented in 2012 and resulted in a good sports infrastructure (open sports grounds) in each Polish municipality.

3/ Another group dealing with the dropout of children from sports and physical activities is represented by non-profit organizations. An excellent example can be the American *Positive Coaching Alliance – PCA* (<https://positivecoach.org/>) which was established in 1998 and a mission of which is to create a positive example for how *coach with a double goal* can function. Such a coach can form the character of all persons who participate directly or indirectly in the processes taking place in the environment of physical activities and sports with a subsequent transfer into the “civil” lives of young athletes. This is after all also the motto of the organization which is to make persons attending physical activities *Better Athletes, Better People* thanks to the physical activities and specific approach of the believers of this philosophy. This however does not concern only the athletes themselves; the proposed practical procedures and recommendations concern and influence also the attitudes of parents, managers, viewers etc. In the course of time, the *PCA* ideas gradually spread to other continents, too. The organization is currently setting trends in the methods of coaching with the holistic approach and focus on the positive development of children and youth, their health and lifelong participation in physical activities. Similarly as in the *KidMove* project, *PCA* makes use of typical interconnection of science and implementation of experience from the long-term sport practice, realizing everything in the first line. *PCA* takes into account

the health as well as the physical and mental development of young athletes and cultivates their lifelong positive attitude towards sports. It strives to inspire and encourage the coaches as well as the managements of organizations. The portfolio of their activities is extensive and concentrated on video lectures, conferences, publication of professional literature and practical advice on their website. A today already classic title describing the PCA philosophy is *The Power of Double Goal Coaching*¹ (2010) by Jim Thompson, which is full of practical ideas and instruments that help the coaches succeed in achieving the two goals: to make their charges ready both for victory and for life outside the sports field. The author defined categories for this purpose, which are represented by acronyms for clear understanding and classified them into three main areas: a/ respect for sport – ROOTS: Teaching respect for Rules, Opponents, Officials, Team mates and Self; b/ defined how to achieve victory in sports “*through the ELM tree of mastership*” – Redefine ‘winner’ (ELM): Focusing on Effort, Learning skills and recovering from Mistakes; c/ enhancement of emotional aspect of physical activities in the form of encouraging, rewarding and promoting young athletes – Fill the emotional tank (E-TANK).

4/ The last group includes organizations permeating multiple spheres, thus creating an intersection focused on dropout mitigation. *The Association For International Sport for All – TAFISA* (<http://www.tafisa.org/about-tafisa>) is a global organization active on all continents, which promotes participation in sports and access to physical activities for everybody. The organization is aware of essential benefits of physical activities in the development of human potential at intellectual, physical, economic, social and emotional levels. It represents an alternative to performance and top-level activities in sports delivering a mission that even the movement for joy has its high price although a number of platforms offered are free of charge. TAFISA realizes that pressure for performance and sophisticated organization of sports, financial unavailability and other factors are obstacles, causes or consequences of neglected physical activity, and offers support through their programme called “*Play & Physical Literacy*”. Their vision is to change the global attitude to physical activities and to do away with the threat of physical inaction. The significance of TAFISA follows out also from their strategic collaboration with other global institutions from the field of politics, health care, culture and sports.

International Council of Sport Science and Physical Education – ICSSPE (<https://www.icsspe.org/>) is an organization promoting education of coaches and other sports professions and public society awareness raising, whose activities have a very long tradition (since the 1950s). The goal of the organization is to cooperate across various sports industries, sports science and physical education practice. The Council associates a wide range of scientific and professional organizations in diverse sports industries, and creates opportunities for interdisciplinary collaboration between scientists and management structures in sports. Its mission makes use of the contribution of kinanthropological research and its applications in practice, all this with the support of partner organizations such as UNESCO, WHO and IOC.

Another example of applied innovations aiming at the education of certain professional groups is the *iCoachKids* project (<https://www.icoachkids.eu/>). This non-profit coach movement was established in 2016 and is focused on the enhanced education of coaches of children and youth worldwide. Based on the research and subsequent implementation of knowledge and procedures, the project innovates both formal and informal programmes for education and preparation of coaches. This also reflects the efforts of ICCE and Leeds Beckett University to direct the education of coaches towards the needs of target groups – children in this case. The project also deals with the integration of foreigners into local communities. The *iCoachKids* project

¹ In Czech published as: Thompson, J. (2017). *Trénink2 : Výchova k úspěchu ve sportu i v životě*. Praha: Mladá fronta.

has recorded a great success, attracting the attention and interest even of countries outside the European Union, international sports federations and multinational corporations from the field of health care and industries. Its only goal is to improve the education of coaches for children and youth throughout the world. The project is funded from the programme Erasmus+.

Another approach how to minimize the dropout is that of an independent Dutch institution which aims to enhance the role of sports in the society through education and awareness raising. In their case, a tool promoting physical activities is the *Knowledge Centre for Sport Netherlands–KCSportNL* (<https://en.kenniscentrumsportenbewegen.nl/>). This independent knowledge institute is strategically supported by the Ministry of Health, Social Care and Sports (*Ministerie van Volksgezondheid, Welzijn en Sport-VWS*). Already the name itself and sports sector integration together with health and social care indicate that sports and physical activities are understood in a societal context in the Netherlands. The institute deals not only with the issue of dropout, e.g. *14 factors to prevent dropout from sport*², but it strives also for other systematic solutions such as sports inclusion, increased participation of females in sports etc. One of concrete systematic approaches is represented by the document called *National Knowledge Agenda Sport and Exercise : From the steps to the podium*³, which understands the issue of sport as a holistic society-wide topic.

International Association for Sport and Leisure Facilities – IAKS (<https://iaks.sport/>) is of a completely different focus. This non-profit organization was established in 1965 and deals with the exchange of ideas and procedures in planning, design and functionality of sports facilities at an international level. *IAKS* organizes international congresses, workshops, study trips and excursions around significant sports objects. It issues a professional journal named “*sb*”, which ranks with the leading world magazines tackling architecture and innovations related to the sphere of sports. It is however not only about big sports centres, athletic halls, stadiums or swimming pools but members of the association also create backgrounds for leisure time physical activities such as playgrounds and facilities in the open, the aim of which is to encourage children to move and to prevent their physical inactivity. The organization is a recognized *IOC* collaborating with the International Paralympic Committee – *IPC* and awarding the most successful architectural projects.

While the other organizations touch on the dropout issue, perceiving it as an important item of their scope of programmes, the *KidMove* project (<https://www.kidmove.eu/>) directly focuses the negative phenomenon, offering solutions for its mitigation through the support of research. The project is being implemented with the help of the European Union (through the project *Erasmus+*) and attending organizations from academic and sports environments are from five countries: Finland, Austria, Netherlands, Poland and Czech Republic. Its main output are so-called *Good Coaching Practices*⁴ informing about reasons and providing at the same time solutions that may help reduce the early dropout of children and adolescents from sports and physical activities. A very important feature of these solutions is that even if they are based on the procedures of scientific research, they are conveyed in a readable, clear and non-scientific form and made available to both experts and children’s parents on the *KidMove* website. They involve four factors: motivation and support (self-esteem) of young athletes, their participation in physical activities on the basis of equal opportunities, co-creation of safe sporting environment, and collaboration in the development of coaching procedures focused on athletes (*Motivating and Empowering young Athletes, Enabling Participation and Equal Opportunities, Co-creating a*

² <https://en.kenniscentrumsportenbewegen.nl/international-projects/keep-youngsters-involved/products-and-tools/>

³ <https://www.kennisbanksportenbewegen.nl/?file=7184&m=1470909064&action=file.download>

⁴ <https://www.kidmove.eu/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/2020-TAITO-59-KIDMOVE-Athlete-Centered-Coaching-Practices.pdf>

Safe Sporting Environment, Collaboration in Developing the Athlete-Centered Coaching Practices). In some cases, the procedures are elaborated by means of acronyms for easier remembering, i.e. in the chapter *Seeking for the Ideal*, dealing with the approach of coaches to adolescent athletes. According to this approach, a knowledgeable coach should show interest – discuss with charges – build their self-esteem – ask them and listen to them (IDEAL: Show Interest – Discuss – Esteem – Ask – Listen). Nonetheless, this is far from being the only programme output because the programme also motivates, supports and educates coaches, parents and athletes by means of blogs, instructive videos and articles, focusing to a considerable extent junior athletes and younger age categories. In the context of *KidMove* project mission, adult persons participating in sports activities should not forget that sports should be fun for children. The atmosphere, entertainment, meeting friends, learning new skills, health care, solidarity and support are very important reasons for young athletes to attend sports activities.

The last of by us mentioned organizations which aims to eliminate the negative phenomenon of dropout from sports by means of improved approaches and education of coaches is *International Council for Coaching Excellence – ICCE* (<https://www.icce.ws/>). *ICCE* is a roofing organization associated with the research and promotion of enhanced coaching methodology. It combines political support from the European Union and the academic environment of Leeds Beckett University in northern England. *ICCE* is currently a leader in European research activities concerning the role of coaches in sports and coaching ethics. It also deals with the issues of equality and participation of females in sports. The Council is aware of demanding and specific roles of coaches and provides a newly conceived approach when the traditional model of education, originally focused on the needs of coaches, has been significantly transformed towards participants of physical activities and their specific needs. This has for example reflected necessity to focus education on issues concerning physically handicapped athletes, coaching of children, coaching of athletes whose results are not oriented on performance, physical activities of seniors etc. All these groups have specific goals and motivation for sports of physical activities, and this is why specific methods and means should be used in their coaching. Sports pedagogues should perceive it in this way and providing organizations should accommodate the mediation of these activities to their clients or athletes accordingly. As similar organizations, the *International Council for Coaching Excellence* publicizes results of their research activities on webinars, conferences, lectures and publications. One of their significant achievements is the publication of *International Sport Coaching Journal* and *International Framework for Coaching – Version 1.2*. (ICCE, ASOIF, & LBU, 2013). The latter provides a set of coaching principles on which the worldwide sports community can agree. The framework was created by *ICCE* in collaboration with the *Association of Summer Olympic International Federations – ASOIF* and *Leeds Metropolitan University – LMU*. The result of this collaboration is a universal platform which supports the development of coaches as well as sports available for all people. Together with the European Union, these two organizations participate also in other specific projects⁵.

In this text we dealt with the negative phenomenon of the early dropout of children from sports. On the example of society-wide endeavour for its mitigation at various levels of public life we outlined possibilities for its identification and how to face it. “Dropout” is triggered and accompanied by diverse factors. We believe that the complexity and social importance of facing the phenomenon requires also a complex approach from professional and government structures. Science and scientific methods appear very effective in the characterization of factors accompanying this

⁵ *iCoachKids* (<https://www.icoachkids.eu/>); *ParaCoach* (<https://www.paracoach.eu/>); *EDU:PACT* (<https://edupact.eu/>); *CoachForce21* (<https://www.coachforce.eu/>); *PEAK* (<https://www.peak-coachingeu.com/>)

phenomenon. Based on the best practices and by means of scientific work design, we can identify reasons triggering physical inactivity. On the example of research results triangulation we also pointed out subjective colour of assessing reasons (Mařík, 2020) leading to the dropout from sports. After the reasons have been determined, however, the mere antagonistic approach is not enough to eliminate the problem. It is not enough to just say that training units will take place for example in a more entertaining environment. It requires to design educational programmes for coaches and to equip them with the kind of specific knowledge and skills able to change the “traditional” inertial work of coaches. It is not only their problem but also responsibility of educators of coaches in individual sports disciplines and activities to teach them how to use the knowledge and skills in practice. Collaboration across scientific, government and non-profit sectors appears to be a very efficient model. This model, where the power and financial aid of government institutions are appropriately combined with scientific procedures focused on the characterization, identification and proposed solutions, is then subsequently brought to life by non-profit organizations and specific entities.

On the example of *International Association for Sport and Leisure Facilities* we could also see how architecture and urbanism can positively affect physical activities of youth. An example can be the athletic exploratorium in Odense, Denmark, directly encouraging to physical activities with its diversity and sensitive setting in the environment (Athletic Exploratorium, 2015). It shows that similarly as the design of school facilities, the issue of urbanism, too, can considerably influence the attitude to physical activities (Kohout & Mitáš, 2014; Kopcakova, J. et al., 2017).

The goal of the paper was not to present an exhaustive list of organizations and their programme scopes but rather to inform about the still ongoing fight for active participation of children in sports and physical activities.

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INTERNET SOURCES

Association for Sport and Leisure Facilities – IAKS, <https://iaks.sport/>

iCoachKids, <https://www.icoachkids.eu/>

International Council for Coaching Excellence – ICCE, <https://www.icce.ws/>

International Council of Sport Science and physical Education – ICSSPE, <https://www.icsspe.org/>

KidMove, <https://www.kidmove.eu/>

Knowledge Centre for Sport Netherlands–KCSportNL, <https://en.kenniscentrumsportenbewegen.nl/>

Positive Coaching Alliance – PCA, <https://positivecoach.org/>

The Association For International Sport for All – TAFISA, <http://www.tafisa.org/about-tafisa>